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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001231

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TAGS: PREL PGOV EPET PINR BO RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN MINSK: GAS PRICE TO INCREASE  
"RIGHT AWAY", DISDAIN FOR LUKASHENKO

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Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) During an introductory courtesy call, Ambassador was told by her Russian counterpart that the price of natural gas will be going up "right away" and that the Belarusian opposition was still in early stages of development. Russian Ambassador Surikov also noted that efforts continue behind the scenes on the draft constitution for the Russia-Belarus union state, while his comments demonstrated a clear lack of regard for Belarus' dictator. End summary.

¶2. (U) In response to Ambassador Stewart's request for an introductory courtesy call, Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Surikov met November 30 with the Ambassador and DCM for about one hour in the Russian Embassy's reception/conference room (used two days earlier for discussions between the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan). He was accompanied by Senior Counselor Vladimir Nikolayevich Tararov and an interpreter.

Gas, Gas Prices

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¶3. (C) Surikov spoke in matter-of-fact terms about gas, noting that it was the main topic of recent Russian-Belarusian discussions, and set the subject in the context of the recent US-Russian agreement to advance Russia's WTO candidacy. While noting that of course the U.S. Congress will have to approve that agreement, he emphasized the point we have heard before that the price of gas for Belarus will be based on "open market principles" and will be going up "right away." When asked about Lukashenko's statements that he did not want to sell Beltransgaz, Surikov said that Belarus had already signed an agreement on that in 2002, with the result Lukashenko was obliged to sell a share in Beltransgaz "whether he wanted to or not." In this context, he noted that an agreement on Beltransgaz would help ease -- rather than prevent -- what might otherwise be a sharp transition to inevitably higher prices.

Democratization, Opposition

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¶4. (C) Surikov acknowledged Lukashenko's recent admission to media that the March 2006 elections had been stolen, and volunteered that results of January 2007 local elections will also be falsified, but still made a plug for easing off pressure on Lukashenko, expressing several times the hope that the EU would build a better dialogue with the regime.

(At no point did he say that the United States should build such a dialogue.) He argued that the process of democratization in Belarus will take a very long time, and that the process is hampered by the fact that so many Belarusians are dependent on state employment. Surikov acknowledged Ambassador Stewart's point that the placement of all government employees on one-year contracts limits those persons' willingness to provide political support to anyone outside the regime. At the same time, Surikov was fairly dismissive of the opposition, saying that it needed time to develop, and ironically calling some of its members "mercantilist" ("money-grubbing" was clearly the term he had in mind).

Union State

¶15. (C) Implying that there was not much urgency to the issue -- and that it had not been a key topic for the most recent meeting between Putin and Lukashenko -- Surikov stressed twice that Russia and Belarus are already in a union of two sovereign, independent states and that only the constitution needs to be defined. He confirmed that the constitution would need to be submitted to the people in both countries for a referendum, adding that lawyers in Russia were examining the issue of when such a referendum might be possible: referenda on domestic matters cannot be held the same year that national elections are held, but there is some thought that referenda on international matters are not subject to the same limitation.

Atmospherics/Bio

¶16. (C) Surikov is known for generally eschewing diplomatic functions and often turns down requests for meetings with fellow chiefs of mission. The former Governor of the Altai region -- he remains a loyal Siberian patriot, and reminisced

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about winter temperatures of minus 55 degrees Celsius -- Surikov arrived in Minsk as Ambassador in March 2006, but did not follow traditional protocol in visiting other diplomatic missions. Initially rather cryptic and clipped in his responses, he warmed up a bit over the course of the meeting, and while he avoided divulging any particular details seemed pleased to both discuss policy and make small talk. He generally did not seek or maintain eye contact. Surikov claimed to have visited all regions of Belarus except for Mogilev, which he hoped to see next, in part for its historical role as the location for the Russian military headquarters during part of the First World War. He intends to go home for the holidays. Surikov reported that the Russians are building a new chancery, to be completed in 2008, and will turn their current building -- adjacent to our embassy compound -- into the Russian Ambassador's residence.

Comment

¶17. (C) Other than discussing the union state, Surikov avoided providing direct insight into the bilateral relationship or details of any Putin-Lukashenko dialogue. The Russian Ambassador seems to reflect the disdain for Lukashenko other official Russians have expressed: that Surikov made no attempt to defend the regime's role in past and future stolen elections, and asserted firmly that Lukashenko will be held to his 2002 commitment to a deal on Beltransgaz confirm to us that Surikov is unimpressed by Belarus' dictator.

Stewart